

Lessons from Matthew 2

Clinton Wahlen

Matthew 2 continues the presentation of Jesus begun in chapter one, but the focus shifts from Jesus as “the Son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1) to His being “King of the Jews” (Matt 2:2). As we saw in “Lessons from Matthew 1,” David is introduced as “the king” (Matt 1:6) and Jesus is introduced as “the Son of David” (Matt 1:1). This title for Jesus, which in the Old Testament almost always refers to Solomon (1 Chr 29:22; 2 Chr 1:1; 13:6; 30:26; 35:3; Prov 1:1; Eccl 1:1), came to designate the messianic successor to Israel’s throne (Isa 9:6–7; Jer 23:5–6; 33:15; Matt 22:42) and appears more often in Matthew than anywhere else in the New Testament (Matt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30–31; 21:9, 15). Matthew’s genealogy calls Joseph “the son of David” (Matt 1:20) to further underscore that Jesus is the rightful King of Israel.

By contrast, Herod was viewed as usurping the throne because, as an Edomite, he was descended not from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but Esau. Like the previous chapter, which established Jesus’ lineage and mission as a fulfillment of prophecy, Matthew 2 shows the place of Jesus’ birth and the place of Jesus’ upbringing as also fulfilling God’s revealed purpose (Matt 2:5, 17, 23).

Structure of the Chapter

That the first two chapters of Matthew combine to tell the story of Jesus’ nativity, is evident from a consideration of their larger structure, which moves from Jesus as the Son of Abraham (Matt 1:2–17) to Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah (1:18–2:23). Jesus is not just the next significant figure in Israel’s history; as Messiah (Matt 1:1, 16–18, 2:4), He is God’s messianic Son (Matt 2:2, 15, 23)—the focal point of *all* history, as the twin allusions to Genesis suggest (Matt 1:1, 18).

Matthew 2 itself is divided into three main sections, each introduced in Greek by a genitive absolute construction (vv. 1, 13, 19) and further divided into smaller units:

- 2:1–12 Wise men seek and find Jesus
 - 2:1–6 The King of the Jews is born in Bethlehem
 - 2:7–12 Wise men find the Child King, give gifts, and head home
- 2:13–18 Jesus survives Herod’s massacre
 - 2:13–15 Joseph takes the Child to Egypt
 - 2:16–18 Herod massacres the children
- 2:19–23 Jesus returns to Israel
 - 2:19–21 Joseph returns with the Child to Israel
 - 2:22–23 Joseph settles in Nazareth

Interestingly, although Herod is mentioned by name nine times in this chapter (vv. 1, 3, 7, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 22), the central figures in the story are actually: (1) the wise men (named in vv. 1, 7) with whom the first section begins and ends; (2) Joseph, who is named at the outset of the next two sections (vv. 13, 19); and (3) the Child, mentioned twenty times, around whom everything and everyone revolve.

Herod himself, though made king by Rome, feels threatened by the young Child and is powerless to find and destroy Him. He relies on the chief priests and scribes to learn where the Child would be born (v. 4). He relies on the wise men for the time and exact location of His birth (vv. 7–8). Finally, because Herod feels deceived by them, he lashes out at helpless babies (v. 16).

Interpretation of the Chapter

1. Verses 1–12

In agreement with Luke 1:5, Jesus was born before Herod the Great’s death, which occurred in either 4 BC or 1 BC—depending on how historical sources are evaluated. Jesus is no longer a baby (Luke 2:12, 16; cf. v. 7) but a “Child” (Matt 2:8–9, 11, etc.), since up to two years may have passed since His birth (see v. 16).

Matthew states that Jesus was born in Bethlehem *of Judea*, which distinguishes the city of David just south of Jerusalem from a town of the same name near Nazareth. It may also allude to the prophecy that the “scepter” would not depart from Judah until the messianic King should come (Gen 49:10). This allusion prepares the way for the quotation of Micah 5:2, which mentions Bethlehem by name (v. 6; cf. John 7:41–42).

Although the Greek word that describes Jesus as a “Ruler” (*hēgoumenos*) is related to the word commonly used for the “reign” (*hēgemonia*) of the Roman Caesars (Luke 3:1; Josephus, *Ant.*

18.211, 219, 224, 234, etc.), God’s King will “shepherd” His people (Matt 2:6; cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1–4).

The “star” was ideal for attracting the attention of the wise men, especially in light of Balaam’s prophecy (Num 24:17). But this was no ordinary celestial phenomenon because it guided them precisely to the place where Jesus was and “stood over” it (v. 9). Sometimes “stars” in Scripture refer to angels (e.g., Job 38:7; Isa 14:12, ESV; Rev 12:4), so this moving “star” seems to refer to a company of angels (cf. DA 60), like that which sang at the time of Christ’s birth (Luke 2:13–15).

The gift of gold is fit for a King (Ps 72:15; Isa 60:6), as were the wise men’s other gifts. But, in retrospect, the frankincense (Exod 30:34–38; Lev 2:1–2, 14, 16; 6:14–18, etc.) and myrrh (Mark 15:23; John 19:39) also witness to Christ’s divinity and coming sacrifice, showing Him worthy of our worship (Matt 2:3, 8, 11).

2. Verses 13–18

The wise men gone, Joseph now takes a leading role in the rest of the chapter.

God initially led Jacob/Israel and his twelve sons into Egypt to save them from famine (Gen 47:1–6, 27; 50:20), just as God led Jesus there to save Him from Herod’s destruction (Matt 2:13–14).

Herod’s massacre of children in Bethlehem recalls the destruction and exile of God’s people by the Assyrians and Babylonians (v. 18 quotes Jer 31:15; cf. 40:1). Just as ancient Israel brought judgment upon themselves, so postexilic Israel’s failure to fully return to God, and their misconstruing that the promised Messiah would come to destroy their enemies, prepared the way for Herod as a great pretender to David’s throne and the extermination of the children in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16–18; cf. DA 65). This typological correspondence highlighted by Matthew suggests that Jesus, as the messianic Son of David, is to bring Israel’s exile to an end.

3. Verses 19–23

Just as God called His “Son” Israel out of Egypt (quoting Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15), so Jesus, as the ultimate fulfillment of this historical type, came out of Egypt to initiate a “new exodus” of salvation for God’s people.

Joseph, always exemplifying faith in the divine instructions given by the angel and obedient to them (unlike Zacharias, Luke 1:18–20), returns to Israel after being told that “those who sought the young Child’s life are dead” (Matt 2:20). This refers principally to Herod (v. 19) but the plural echoes God’s instructions to Moses (Exod 4:19), whom Matthew portrays as a type of Christ.

Originally, Herod had willed Antipas as his heir but altered it shortly before his death, appointing him instead over Galilee and Berea, and Archelaus over Judea (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.188). The latter was indeed ruthless, and Joseph’s fears were confirmed by the angelic instruction not to return there, leading to the family’s settling in Nazareth of Galilee (Matt 2:22–23). This will later be mentioned as a fulfillment of prophecy (Matt 4:14–16; cf. John 7:40–43, 52).

Recent excavations support a first-century Jewish occupation of Nazareth. Matthew discerns Jesus’ settling there as a fulfillment of prophecy based on the similarity in sound between “Nazarene” and the Hebrew word *netzer*, “branch,” which is a familiar messianic image in the Old Testament (Isa 11:1; cf. 4:2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12) and in Hebrew writings of the first century (1QH^a XIV.15; XV.19; XVI.6, 8, 10; cf. the interpretation of Isa 11:1 in 4Q161 8–10 III.11–25).

Application of the Chapter

Some lessons that can be drawn from this chapter are:

1. The Scriptures are God’s clear and reliable means of communicating His will and purposes to us, though sometimes God communicates more directly (e.g., through dreams or visions). God’s communication both with Joseph, the son of David, and with wise foreigners seeking greater light shows that it is not our origins but our openness to God’s revelation and willingness to receive and act on it that counts (see DA 59, 62–63).
2. A partial, distorted knowledge of the Bible may be worse than no knowledge of it at all. The chief priests and scribes knew the place of Christ’s birth but, together with King Herod, were troubled at the news because it did not fit *their* expectations and this new, potentially disruptive, political power threatened their positions.
3. As prophecy is fulfilled, it testifies to “present truth”—the truth whose time has come in God’s advancing plan of salvation. Jesus as God’s Son, in fulfillment of prophecy, successfully recapitulates Israel’s history, thereby becoming their (and our) true Shepherd and King.

